A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 53

With *Oceana* combat-proven, the time had come for Grievous to set in motion his next plan to drag out the war. His high command gathered by hologram, minus one impudent Human girl on leave.

"The Loyalists will not make the same mistake twice," Grievous told them, as a map of the Galaxy's current front lines appeared. "Our enemy is painstakingly stockpiling for a three-pronged offensive. Heavily-guarded convoys are coming in and out of Ord Mantell, Roche, and Eriadu, and have been for the past month. I do not have to spell out the enemy's intended plan. He has more ships, more men, more capability. And foolishly, he has spread his forces widely."

Three arrows lit up the map, proceeding outwards from the three hub planets. One was pointed up the Entralla Route at Muunilinst, one up the Rimma Trade Route to Sluis Van, and one up the Perlemian Trade Route at Raxus itself. Three major hyperlanes, three major centers of Confederate power in the sights of the Republic.

"Three separate attacks into three separate theaters of operations," said Pors Tonith, the Muun whose chief talent was wiggling out of sticky situations. "Big and flashy, but dangerous."

"And none of these invasion forces are in a position to support each other," the Neimoidian veteran and possibly-once-a-traitor Mar Tuuk said. Grievous still didn't know where the wily old admiral had stood, that day.

"He who defends everything defends nothing," said Kronaak, the hulking crustacean monster from Siskeen. "We cannot repel three invasions at once."

"And he who attacks has no need to defend!" Helnurath, the huge Stenax pirate lord, cracked his knuckles. "I say, we take the fight to them."

"One should never divide their firepower too much." Ricimer Eemon, son of Caramm's dictator Ado Eemon, looked thoughtful. "That goes for us even more than them, due to our lack of numbers."

"Ships *and* crew," Rame Cartroll said. As the man whose fleet had been all but annihilated in the days after Coruscant, Cartroll knew best just how close the Confederacy had come to losing eight months ago.

"I am sure the General has a plan already," said Alzar Khwaramenes, the brilliant Givin navigator who had been instrumental to the victory at Kashyyyk. The skull-faced alien looked at Grievous. "You said the foe has *foolishly* spread his forces widely, sir. You must see an opportunity."

"A fleet is a complex thing," Grievous said. "The Republic has already replaced the twenty-five million personnel it lost at Kashyyyk. But their replacements are all unseasoned, untried. They have never fought a full-scale fleet battle, if they have ever fought in *any* battle at all. They know the theories, but can they implement them? They will be slow, cautious, uncoordinated. If their admirals are wise, they have been drilling as they prepare, learning to work as a team, memorizing the correct procedures until they could do them in their sleep. These three new fleets will not be weaklings. But they *will* be inexperienced."

He began to pace, an arm behind his back. "Kronaak is right. He who defends everything defends nothing. When Tarkin moves, we will have to pick between splitting our forces between the Galactic north and south, or leaving the Sluis Van pocket to its fate."

"Sluis Van is our second-greatest shipyard facility, General," Rame Cartroll said. "We cannot abandon our holdings on the Rimma Trade Route. Our industrial capability would be reduced by a third or more." That he was stationed in the Sluis Van pocket and led its defense also had something to do with his protest, Grievous was sure.

"We cannot," Grievous said. "And we will not. The solution is simple. We destroy the invasion fleet marshaling at Eriadu before it can be deployed."

"Simple indeed!" said Mar Tuuk. "Eriadu is only the most fortified Republic star system in the Outer Rim."

"And the gate to both the Western Reaches and Trailing Sectors," said Khwaramenes. "It is the most strategic location on that side of Hutt Space."

Grievous nodded. Everything they said was true.

"We'd need to repeat what we did at Coruscant," Pors Tonith said.

"Coruscant only happened because they believed it unassailable. Without that secret hyperlane through the Deep Core, we could have never made it there with so many ships intact. Eriadu had been preparing for an attack against it for four years," said Cartroll. "The Loyalists *knew* we were building up a strike force, they just didn't know *where* we were going to hit. If we start building up another at Sluis Van, they'll know exactly what we have in mind."

"Then we will not assemble it at Sluis Van," said Grievous.

Khwaramenes spoke up: "Finding an uninhabited system off the major lanes is trivially easy. There are more red dwarf stars in the Galaxy than there are planets that can support life, most have never been visited by a droid probe, let alone living beings. The problem is not finding a hiding spot, it is *supplying* the ships hiding there. There is a real chance we'd have to chart an entirely new hyperspace route, which is not something one does on a whim."

"But it can be done?" Grievous asked.

"Yes…"

Grievous tapped at the keyboard in front of him, and sent the necessary information to Khwaramenes. "I have already identified a suitable system within forty light years of Eriadu to stage at. No hyperwave sensors cover it. It is in direct line of sight of Eriadu, with no gravitational obstacles between the two. A child could plot that jump. You will find a way to get both of our mobile strike forces to this system, avoiding locations the Republic is watching."

The Givin leaned back, the slight slump of his shoulders akin to a Human's face going pale. "This is a *tall* order, General."

"But you are going to do it."

"I will need a month to run the calculations alone."

"You will have it."

"I take it you will want to move quickly, General?" asked Ricimer Eemon.

"Of course. The moment they notice both strike forces have disappeared they will go to their highest readiness."

"Then we have a major roadblock, sir," Mar Tuuk said. "Both strike forces are in the Galactic north. We have no direct access to the south. We'll have to smash our way through the Core or Inner Rim and lose the element of surprise, or take the backroads through Hutt Space, which is unfriendly territory at best, and not nearly as quick."

"I believe I can help with that," said Kronaak. "There *is* a swift route through Hutt Space."

"Surely you don't mean the Triellus Trade Route," said Pors Tonith.

"I do," said Kronaak. "The Triellus has a reputation for being slow and dangerous. But one Captain Komara made the transit in eighteen hours."

"In a cloaked ship," Helnurath growled. "Coward!"

"Clever," Grievous corrected him. "So, a quick transit is possible, provided you are never seen."

"The Hutts use deception and misinformation as you use turbolasers and lightsabers, sir," Kronaak said. "They want the Galaxy to think the Triellus is worth less than it really is. The common wisdom is that the Triellus Trade Route is old, poorly-charted, and full of pirates waiting to pounce on the unlucky spacer. These are carefully cultivated lies. My home planet's overlord, Tar-Mairon, knows this. He has spies up and down the Triellus. Its beacons and relays are regularly maintained, unsanctioned pirates are driven away, and Hutt-contracted patrols keep it clear. But while the Hutts may be crafty, their minions are *lazy*. I can provide you with a full schedule of their operations. They rarely make variations. Furthermore, one does not need to be invisible to escape notice. The Hutts keep a secondary watch on their trade routes with a series of hyperwave sensors anchored in real space. Most are hundreds of years old; some are thousands of years old. All are kept in good condition, but one *Munificent* for each would easily be able to jam them into uselessness… or merely obscure the areas of the hyperwave spectrum our ships appear on."

"It doesn't matter if our ships are visible because the Hutts won't be looking at the EM spectrum to begin with," said Ricimer Eemon. Kronaak nodded.

"Precisely. And if we plot our jumps to land our fleets a light day or so outside their systems? They'll never know we were there until it's far too late. Even *if* they've got EM sensors that powerful in use, specifically pointed in those directions."

"Perfect," Grievous said. "The timing and positioning will be delicate. The longer our frigates jam their sensors, the longer they'll have to realize something is wrong. And we will need to jump the frigates in before the main fleet arrives. *And* this all must happen many light-hours away from the system center. I will need expert navigators for these ships."

"My people will supply them," Khwaramenes said. "Our navigator guild escaped Yag'Dhul before it fell. They will be ecstatic to contribute to the war effort."

"I will leave the course-planning to you and yours, then," said Grievous. "Kronaak, use your Siskeenese contacts and decide if we should destroy these patrols or avoid them. Eemon, you will begin drawing up the logistical needs of this operation. The three of you are dismissed."

Givin, crab-man, and Human stood, saluted, and vanished from the holo-conference, no doubt to their own private call.

"The Loyalists will not miss our two strike forces disappearing," Grievous went on. "We will sow confusion in their intelligence agencies, and mask our true objective. Listen well…"

Sanya stood at the door to Esera's room, or what would be her room for six more hours. She breathed in deeply, exhaled, and kept doing that until her heart had slowed down. *Alright. Let's do this.* She rang.

In short time, Esera appeared, flushed and sweaty in her workout clothes. Purity stood behind her, looking giddy. They'd turned the bed on its side and pushed it against the wall.

"I'm not sure I want to be talking to you right now," said Esera, giving her a tired look. All of Sanya's prepared statements flew out of her head.

"Uh, what are you two up to in here?" she asked, as strange and depraved ideas flashed through her mind.

"We are sparring!" Purity chirped, bouncing on her heels and grinning like a maniac. "I am *demolishing* the Captain in unarmed combat, as usual!"

"If I can last ten seconds against Purity, I can probably last twenty against any Human her size, so I'd like to get back to that," Esera said, regarding her coldly. "You've got five seconds to start talking, Sanya."

"Okay. We've got unfinished business," said Sanya, looking up at her. "Look, I don't agree with some of the things you've done lately. But you know what? I'm not you, I wasn't there, it's not my place to harass you over what you could have or should have done. I'm sorry."

That was clearly not what Esera had expected to hear. She blinked, her building anger wiped away for the moment. Sanya took the initiative:

"What *is* my place is being someone you can talk to. I didn't like it, back when I said I don't know you. I *don't* know you, Esera. You *are* a stranger to me. But I *want* to be your friend, for real, this time. You can't do this alone."

For once, Esera did the mature thing, and thought about how to answer. Seconds passed before she answered. "I was told you were all thirty seconds from destruction," she said, in a quiet voice.

"Yeah. *Encounter* was about to tear itself apart. Just a little bit more and… well, none of us but you would be here."

Esera frowned, and she lost that hard look in her eyes. "Something right in front of you today might disappear forever tomorrow…"

"Huh?"

"Voyan told me that a while back."

"Oh, okay, yeah, I believe that. He tries *really* hard to come off as profound."

That got a little smile out of Esera. "Yeah… he really does."

"So… are we good?"

Esera sighed, crossed her arms, and leaned against the door frame. Behind her, Purity watched, head tilted in curiosity. For a few long moments, Esera looked at the wall behind Sanya before speaking. "Honestly? No. You were the one person I thought was my friend, and it turns out you were faking it all along out of some misguided attempt to spare my feelings. I'm mad. And yes, that all happened a decade ago, and we haven't seen each other in seven years, and…" She shook her head. "A Jedi needs to look inward with honesty. I looked inward, and I'm still upset with you. It hurts, a lot. I know you want to start things over with a clean slate, but I can't change how I feel immediately."

"That's…" *As immature and petty as ever,* Sanya thought, and realized Esera might be reading her mind. But she didn't seem to be. "That's not the answer I wanted to hear, but I understand it."

"Good, I was going to get angry again if you tried to push it," Esera said. "I've got a lot to deal with right now."

"All the more reason to have friends. You can't just count on a robot all the time."

Purity's placid demeanor changed in an instant, and she gave Sanya the so-called 'Purity stare,' an expressionless look but for the intense energy in her eyes. It was eerie how she could be so lifelike. "I am *not* a robot," Purity said.

"Calm down, Purity," said Esera. "Is there anything else, Sanya?"

"Sellero."

"The pirate woman? What about her?" Esera frowned. "You don't expect me to care what happens to her now, do you? She tried to assault me on my own ship."

"I'm just saying, she might be useful. Anyone who can scrounge up that many terraforming machines on a week's notice has a certain skillset. Better to have her working for you than dancing at one of these Nalroni clubs. Zule and I have gotten *three* job offers already, you know."

Esera shuddered. "Maybe Khan will find a use for her. She can accompany us until we run into him again, but she's your responsibility. Now-"

"Uh, one last thing."

"*What?*"

"What's going to happen to Rahab? Is she coming with us too?"

"No. She's going back to her people, there's some kind of ritual they need to do. The Tenaus will be declaring a vendetta on Potkin. Now, if that's all, Sanya?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Come, Purity, we've still got a lot of time before we have to leave, let's not waste it."

Purity nodded, her eagerness flooding back.

Hours later, *Encounter*'s former crew boarded the cruiser *Oceana*, and soon Celanon and Port Good Fortune were far behind them.

"The ship provisionally known as the M-class cruiser was put into development only after the Battle of Kashyyyk," Director Orlok told Tarkin and the admirals of the navy. "We believe they might be named *Oceana*-class but our sources haven't confirmed it. We're not sure how long it took to develop them, exactly, but our source informs us that the design is *still* not finalized."

"But they're already building them!" said Admiral Salima, commanding officer of the Home Fleet.

"Indeed." Orlok nodded, and pointed at the aft section of the hologram blueprint… or what Republic Intelligence thought the blueprint was, based on scans the star destroyer *Daring* had taken during the skirmish at Botajef. "Long-range observation indicates that there have been substantial changes made to the construction of the engine block. The forty-third hull under construction had these implemented, as well as all other ships following it. It appears the rebels will be testing these things under live conditions, and making changes on the assembly line as needed."

"*That's terribly inefficient,*" Moff Praji said via hologram transmission from Alderaan. "*They'll needlessly lose ships to these design problems as they're discovered.*"

"Perhaps so," Orlok said. "But look at the production data."

Tarkin cleared his throat. "They're building these new ships in half the time we can construct our *Imperators* and *Tectors*. Grievous is attempting to put these into service as fast as possible, consequences be damned. In his position, I'd be doing the same thing."

"Should we revise our own production tables, my lord?" Admiral Salima asked. "We've got the new *Nebulon* frigates coming into service right on schedule, but it'll still be over a year until Kuat can put *Imperator* and *Tector* production in full swing."

Moff Wessex, calling in from Paarin Minor, spoke up. "*This new M-class held its own against star destroyer* Daring*. In firepower and shields, at least, it's the equal of our newest capital ships. The bulk of the Republic Navy's front line strength consists of* Venators*, however. I fear for the continued effectiveness of our fleet's backbone.*"

As do I, Tarkin thought, putting his hand on his chin. The Ultimate Weapon's construction was eating up more and more materials as he accelerated its assembly. Thousands of escort ships had been entered into the naval registry with the cooperation of Kuatis who knew when to shut up and follow orders, but a close investigation would reveal none of those ships had ever been laid down, let alone finished and deployed. They were even writing off capital ships the same way. On paper, the Republic's fleet was surging in strength. In reality, it was growing far more slowly than any but a few knew. Orlok himself was questioning the statistics already. *Perhaps it's time to bring more people in on the weapon…*

The presentation on the observed capabilities of the ship continued, but Tarkin focused on who was trustworthy enough to fill in on the truth.

If Esera had ever thought *Encounter* was uncomfortable, *Oceana* showed her the true meaning of the word. The ceilings were clearly meant for beings taller than Gossams and every piece of the ship looked like it belonged where it was, that was the best she could say of the cruiser. But the hum of the reactors was constant, the cabins were small and cramped, the passage walls were nothing more than bulkheads partitioning air-tight segments with exposed machinery, conduits, and pipes everywhere. Ease of maintenance clearly came before all other considerations here. *Oceana*'s habitable spaces were slightly larger than *Encounter*'s, but *Encounter* had just over a dozen aboard, *Oceana* had upwards of two hundred organic crew. They were packed in tight.

"I am appalled," Voyan said to her, in the mess hall, which had long tables and benches instead of individual chairs. Alize had forced herself into the galley to teach the ship's cook a thing or two. A Zygerrian a head taller and thrice the weight of her opponent could get away with things like that, so at least the food wasn't bad.

"It's like someone took a *Venator* and stripped every possible comfort out of it," said Esera. "And those aren't comfortable ships."

"If any of my old Trade Federation captains saw this, they'd have aneurysms. Machinery out in the open for all to see, no sound deadening anywhere, everything's bare metal but nothing is polished to a mirror finish, the difference between a senior officer's cabin and an ensign's cabin is that the senior officer doesn't have to share theirs…"

"So, the Confederacy finally has a purpose-built warship."

"…You know, I kind of like it," said Voyan. "I'm appalled, but I kind of like it. We're not corporate henchmen anymore. It's showing."

Esera tried not to roll her eyes. She did her best to deal with *Oceana*'s utilitarian design on the voyage to Minntooine. But all the amenities were *inside* the shower, which served as the whole private head for her cabin… Esera was not alone in being relieved to get to their destination.

Minntooine was an alien planet, but with an all-too-familiar shadow over it. Decades before the Clone Wars began, Quarren and Mon Cala tensions had been already boiling. The Quarren Isolation League's colony on Minntooine, in a fit of paranoia, hired a Karkarodon mercenary company to serve them. Unfortunately for them, the Karkarodons were not the kind of mercenaries who went home when their employers ran out of money. When the Isolation League defaulted, eight years before the war, they took the planet as payment. In theory, the Quarren Isolation League's civilian government still held authority, but the Karkarodon military administration called all the shots. And like many military governments, the regime that ruled Minntooine had no qualms about violating civil rights when it served them. Minntooine's industries ran like a well-oiled machine, the rest of the planet languished in neglect, in a quasi-feudal state where the commanders of each military region ran their locales like personal fiefs. Esera did not much like this junta.

Still, dealing with unsavory people was part of her job. Maybe one day she'd do in the junta like she'd done in the Zygerrian monarchy. But not this day.

"She's a fine ship," General Triodus Mokara, public face of the military administration, said to her. "Unfixable, my foremen say, but perfectly adequate for training purposes. We'll anchor her just off of the new hub we've built."

"That's… good," Esera said. "She's got a lot of history, even if it's just in the last year. It'd be a shame to send her to the scrappers so soon."

"We'll take good care of her. General Grievous is starting up some big training program, he's asked us to host it. Thus the new hub."

Minntooine's industry was mostly in space. Much of the material used was mined on the ocean floors, and shipped up to orbit on repulsorlift-powered elevators. The shipyards themselves looked like sea monsters, with long limbs growing from vast shielded bodies. When one looked closer, one noticed that those limbs were fractal in nature, each one hosting many smaller branches, and each of *those* branches was a shielded zero-gravity dock where a new ship was being born. Minntooine had three completed hubs, each building hundreds of ships at a time, and a fourth was in its final stages of construction. This planet outpaced Sluis Van in production, but the fleet consensus was clear: the Sluissi-made ships were just *better*. Minntooine went for quantity over quality, and in Esera's opinion, the Confederacy needed quantity at the moment.

"I'm aware of the program, General. I will in fact be overseeing it here when it begins," Esera told the Karkarodon.

"Oh? I shall look forward to working with you, Lady Komara." Mokara bowed, just enough to be respectful. Without her uniform, everyone at Minntooine had taken to using her noble title, and not military rank. It didn't *bother* her, but 'Captain Komara' felt more appropriately humble to her.

Later, she found Voyan at one of the big windows on the hub's main promenade, watching the shipyard tugs tractor beam *Encounter* into her new resting place. Sooner or later, a permanent boarding tube and airlock would be installed, but that was weeks in the future.

"You've got mixed feelings, I sense," Esera said to him.

"I won't call her a *good* ship, she was a headache to maintain," said Voyan. "But she got us through a lot. Our whole journey began on *Encounter*."

"Yeah…" Technically, she and Voyan had begun on *Invisible Hand,* and then moved to Khan's supply ship, and then to *Encounter*, but *Encounter* was where they'd started to act like a team, and not mutually antagonistic acquaintances. "You think we'll get a new ship?"

"I'm sure we will. I just hope she's better taken care of, when we get her."

"Yeah…"

Voyan took his eyes off what was happening outside, and turned to her. "You've got something to ask, Captain. Ask it."

"Are you sure I'm the mind reader here?"

"You have your Force powers. I grew up with normal people."

"Alright, fair." Esera took a breath. "When I gave you the order to Base Delta Zero that beskar mine, you didn't even hesitate. It's not an order I wanted to give, and I'm still struggling with it. But you seem fine."

Voyan shrugged. "How many of our own workers have died, every time the Loyalists hit our shipyards or refineries or- *anything?* They may not be combatants, but they are directly contributing to the war effort. They served their cause by mining ore, we served ours by turning that place into a lake of molten rock. What's there to lose sleep over?"

"I guess…"

"There's nothing I can say that will clear your conscience, Esera."

Esera let herself have a quiet moment of appreciation that her engineer had developed the sense to know when to be formal and when to be, for lack of better word, *real*. Titles and ranks just put walls between people, and sometimes a wall was the last thing she wanted. She cleared her throat.

"You're right. It's just… I'm a Jedi. Or was a Jedi, and I still believe in the Jedi way, just not the corruption we were taught. I'm supposed to protect life, not end it. I guess we're all dealing with this in our own way. I wouldn't be surprised if all the Jedi who went over to Tarkin rationalized it so deeply they started honestly believing themselves."

"Who can say?" Voyan asked. He looked over her head, and changed the subject entirely. "Two weeks of leave, I heard?"

"Yep!" Sanya's voice said. The little Devaronian joined them at the window. "I'm thinking Raxus. I didn't get to see much last I was there. Being just released from Separatist jail and all."

Voyan cleared his throat. "Miss Sanya, Raxus is the only choice you have."

"I mean, the rest of Mon Cala space is blockaded. I guess Stalimur is nearby too, but if Esera's dresses are anything to go by, I don't think it's really my speed, you know? No offense, Esera."

Esera waved the remark off.

"It's not just that," Voyan said. "Most Tionese are… not fond of aliens, to put it gently. When I said Raxus is the only choice you have, I was being literal. You wouldn't make it far past the spaceport on most other Tionese worlds. At best you'd be denied entry, at worst they'd just shoot you. These people have long memories, and their hatred for the Hutts, the Republic, and all things alien is enduring."

"Ah…" Sanya rubbed the back of her head. "That's awkward."

"Raxus was the provincial capital of the Tion Cluster through several Sith imperial dynasties," said Voyan. "The Tionese of Raxus who insisted on holding the old grudges didn't survive their conquerors."

"Lovely place, this Tion Cluster. How our dear Esera came from such barbaric stock, we'll never know. But I'm still going to explore Raxulon. I haven't *really* been in a big city in over a year, now!"

"It's alright," Esera said.

"Why don't you and I go meet those Sephi friends of yours again, Esera?" asked Sanya. "That's a good place to start!"

"Uh…"

Voyan's face turned devious. "That's a fine idea, Sanya."

"I don't know," Esera said. She'd made peace with Sanya just two days ago, getting dragged around Raxulon by her felt like too much, too soon. *It might be a good distraction, though…*

"The alternative is coming with me to Argai," said Voyan. "I have a pilgrimage to make."

"I'm *not* going to the shrine of an ancient barbarian warlord," Esera said, knowing full well Argai was the birthplace of Xim the Despot.

"He was a great man who fought for Human freedom against the Hutts," Voyan said, crossing his arms. Sanya gave him a wary glance. On Coruscant, those words would have started a fight, at least among educated people.

"Fine, I'll go to Raxus," said Esera. "I'm going to regret this…"

The computer core ripped from *Pride of Sellero* sat in its own corner of *Daring*'s meager hangar bay. Shadday Potkin walked slowly around it, checking every cable and line.

"You're sure there are no problems?" she asked.

"None," said Meecha.

"We're golden," said Bondo.

Those two ex-pirate boys had proven immensely useful in setting up the core, allowing for Potkin's control over the GX1 battle droids to continue indefinitely. But their thoughts were elsewhere than their work. She reached into their minds, brushing aside their meager subconscious defenses like they were smoke.

"You've lost a friend," Potkin said.

"Uh, yeah." Bondo shook his head, waving away something that wasn't there. The other boy did something similar. Neither seemed aware of what had just happened.

"Judow went missing in all the chaos down there," said Meecha. "He was a real piece of work…"

Big words coming from the guy who sold him out to his death, thought Potkin.

"But he was still someone we grew up with, you know?" Bondo finished the sentence.

"I'll have you know we found his body," said Potkin. "Dismembered by a laser. I came to Mandalore to stop a Dark Jedi named Esera Komara. While our agreement is fulfilled and you are free to leave with your payment… I could make use of your continued services. The Dark Jedi escaped, after all."

Technically, everything she had said was true. But the teeming masses confused lightsabers with lasers all the time, and by dropping the word *Jedi* in such association with their friend's death…

"We're in," said Meecha.

"I want revenge," Bondo said.

You idiots, you're the reason he's dead! But Potkin forced herself to smile at the two dullards. "Good. We have a lot of work to do. Big things are in motion, and we have a part to play."

Summer's last gasp was upon Raxulon city. The trees had turned yellow, orange, red, and blue, in the case of some imported varieties, but the season was determined to hit this region with one final heatwave. It was nothing compared to Zoma V's steamy atmosphere, but Sanya was keeping an eye on Esera nonetheless.

"I much prefer winter," Esera muttered, as they sat beneath a shade outside a restaurant. She'd moved her chair until she had her back to the wall, even though the sun-cooked duracrete a meter away could have fried a meal.

"Of course you do," said Sanya. "You ate twice what I did and you're burning so hot I can *feel* you from over here."

Esera blinked. "You can?"

"Okay, not out in the open, but back at the store? Yeah, you're like a furnace on legs." Sanya held her hand over Esera's; it gave off a heat that would have been feverish for anyone else. "Just how cold is Stalimur, exactly?"

"Uh… Well, I was comfortable in those dresses of mine. At the equator."

Sanya shuddered. She couldn't imagine wrapping herself up in something so bulky and constrictive. "I don't get it. How does anything live there?"

"I don't know. I was only there a few days." The bitterness in those words couldn't be hidden. Esera glared at nothing in particular, and tugged at the hem of her skirt. "If they saw what I was wearing now, they'd *really* think I was a prostitute…"

What she was wearing now was mildly conservative, for a young woman of Raxulon. She could have blended right into the youthful crowd, if she'd stopped fretting about people being able to see a few centimeters of thighs or a little bit of skin below her neck. Her glancing about never stopped.

"I don't think I ever want to visit Stalimur," Sanya said.

"If the Jedi had never taken me, I'd be someone's wife and a child's mother by now," said Esera. Her glare faded into a troubled expression.

Eighteen's a bit young for all that, thought Sanya. *More than a bit young!* Humans and Devaronians alike didn't fully mature until their middle twenties, the women of Devaron didn't start making families until they'd passed that point. Most developed Human civilizations did the same. But Stalimur was not among those civilizations, was it? The Tion Cluster was full of sad, impoverished, isolated planets like Esera's home, where the ancient ways had never died. Raxus alone had risen above the rest, and only with outside prompting.

Sanya was getting the feeling that Esera's cultural heritage wasn't a safe subject for someone so recently back in her good graces. "So, uh, how do you think Purity is doing?"

"Those two idiots can run around on Argai all they like!" Esera said with a huff. "I can't believe Voyan talked her into going with him. Purity was supposed to stay with me!"

"Are you *jealous*?" asked Sanya, smirking.

"Of course not. I should have known Khan's creation would be more interested in barbaric warlords than…" Esera waved a hand at the city. "Shopping and restaurants and whatever else you drag me off to. But I would have preferred not to suffer this alone."

"Suffer? How is this suffering? I was about to be incinerated a few days ago, I'd call *that* suffering." At that, Esera could only look away. *Hold on, Sanya, this isn't a suffering contest,* she told herself. "Look, we've both been through a lot lately. I deal with it by finding a way to unwind. I think you should try to do the same."

"Fine, I'll try… But it's not going to happen in a big city. It's too…" She trailed off, and shook her head.

"Too busy, too loud, too stimulating, I get it," said Sanya. "I don't think attending seminars at the Raxulon college of mechanical whatever is relaxing, but Zule's going to be there all week. Everyone's got their thing. So, how about this: there's a resort town on the coast, Tamwith Bay. Let's check it out tomorrow, get away from the bustle. It'll be fun!"

Esera didn't look convinced, but she went along with it.

"Have you ever taken a moment to think about your life, and realized just how many mistakes you had to make to get where you are today?" asked Asajj Ventress, as she swept her macrobinoculars slowly across the speeder's passenger side window. Their vehicle hovered in the shadowy nook of another tower, suspended in the air.

"On occasion," Obi-wan said.

"Because that's what I'm doing right now. Me and Obi-wan Kenobi, sitting in a rented airspeeder, casing out the 500 Republica building like a pair of petty thieves."

"And I thought I was pleasant company." Obi-wan was trying his best to keep the mood light. He had a hard time summoning genuine dislike for the woman. Yes, they'd fought as enemies years ago. Yes, she'd killed people on his side of the war. Yes, she'd been Dooku's apprentice. But they'd also fought as allies, and Dooku had thrown her away in the quintessential Sith manner. Ventress knew what the dark siders really were now. Obi-wan *hoped* she was serious about rethinking her way of life. Besides, she was fun. There'd been a serious lack of fun in his life since Anakin's passing. Should a Jedi have been above fun? Perhaps. *But perhaps the Jedi aren't right about everything. Look at the state of the Galaxy right now…* Treasonous thoughts. Heretical, even. *Master Qui-gon, if you could hear me now…*

"We have been here for three hours and seen nothing," said Ventress. "I don't even sense Sidious."

"You've met him?"

"Not exactly. Even as a hologram, he had a *presence*." She shuddered, a wave of uneasiness flowing through the Force. "I'm not sensing that presence. I'm sensing… something else."

"The *pull*, you called it," Obi-wan said. He felt it too, in a way. Something dark, deep down inside that tower. Distantly far down. 500 Republica was an ancient tower. Who knew how deep its foundations and basements really went? The Jedi had gone deep in pursuit of Sidious there, before Grievous's sudden attack had thrown everything off.

"Something's down there," said Ventress. "Beyond a doubt. If Sidious is down there too, it's drowning him out with dark side energy. It's drowning out *Sidious* with its power." She lowered the macrobinoculars, and gazed into the dark abyss that led into the Coruscant undercity. For a rare, precious moment, Obi-wan saw Asajj Ventress unmasked. She was just a scared young woman, who'd made so many catastrophically bad choices with her life that she'd ended up a few kilometers from *something* so dark it could hide a Sith lord. But as quickly as her guard had dropped, she recovered, eyes hardening, jaw set. "I heard Maul's on the loose again."

"Embarrassing, isn't it?" Obi-wan sighed. "I *specifically* told Ahsoka to capture him, not kill him, because he has a habit of coming back to life. Well, he has a habit of impossible escapes too, it seems."

"You think he's gone back to Sidious, now that Dooku is dead?"

"I don't think so. Not after what Ahsoka told the Council. I think he really had been honest about working together with her to stop Sidious. I wonder what would have happened if he'd known Anakin was already dead when Ahsoka confronted him…" He shook his head. "There's no point in it now, actually. Maul's on the loose. Sidious is up to his old tricks. And *something* evil has landed on Coruscant."

"We made some mistakes to get here," Ventress said. "Some big damn mistakes."

That's probably as much an admission of guilt as she'll ever give, Obi-wan thought. "What do we do with mistakes, Ventress?" he asked her. Ventress turned back towards him, and raised an eyebrow. "We fix them."

She looked away again, and was quiet for a time. "There are things you can't fix," Ventress said, almost to herself.

"There are. Do they decide who you are?"

"Come on, Kenobi, don't give me your Jedi wholesome goodness speech. We both know I'm not *that*." Ventress crossed her arms, and found something interesting in the sky to look at.

"And yet you decided to be here, taking part in the operation against Darth Sidious, the most evil being in the Galaxy. Curious."

"I could still leave!"

Obi-wan unlocked the speeder doors. "Feel free. But it's a *long* way down."

Ventress took one look out the window into the abyss below them, and pulled her head back in, her face somehow even paler than usual. "You're mildly more appealing than setting a record for fastest descent to the undercity."

"A glowing endorsement, my darling."

The former assassin groaned, and pulled up her macrobinoculars again. An hour must have passed in bored silence, until both of them bolted upright.

"Do you feel that?" asked Obi-wan.

"It's moving!" Asajj pointed at the tower, her finger moving up and up.

Obi-wan started the speeder's thrusters. "Then so are we!"

"Are we in position?" Grievous asked, from his tower lair aboard *Invisible Hand*.

"*Nearly,*" said Clothar Aclinde's hologram. "*It's taken all day to set up the teams without tipping them off.*"

All across the Confederacy, Office of Safety and Information operatives and local police forces were closing in on the largest known Loyalist spy rings. They turned up in the strangest places. For instance, there were a handful of Loyalist agents and their Republic Intelligence handler in the resort town of Tamwith Bay on Raxus Secundus. They'd infiltrated into the planet's logistics network, and were using shipments of locally-made food packages to determine the logistical strain Confederate fleets were in… at least those with Raxian crews, who wanted Raxian food.

"Prioritize speed above all else," said Grievous.

"*Is this absolute?*" asked Aclinde.

"Yes. Commotion, chases, collateral damage, I do not care, Aclinde. I want these spies destroyed before they can warn any others of what's happening. Prisoners would be useful, but do not hesitate to kill."

Aclinde's hologram smiled, and clasped his hands. "*We Carammites run circles around Republic Intelligence. We've been playing these games for decades. They've barely had four years to get serious.*"

Grievous growled in affirmation. "I am counting on it."

Between Mandalorian tunnels full of three meter tall battle droids, Zygerrian dining halls with predatory monarchs, Shumavar ruins infested with snipers, field hospitals on Umbara, and a Raxus beach, Esera was certain that the beach was the worst of the lot. Never in her life had she felt so *exposed*.

I wish Purity was here, she thought. *Or Alize. Or Voyan*- no, actually, she didn't want him here at all, not while she was dressed like *this*. Complete strangers were bad enough, a man she *knew* would have been far worse. Luckily, Sanya was grabbing most of the attention. Aliens weren't uncommon at all on Raxus, not even at seaside resorts like Tamwith Bay, but one such alien was a bright reddish-magenta in skin tone. She caught eyes, and had currently joined a strange ball game played in waist-deep water while half naked. Again, with complete strangers.

Is this what normal people do? wondered Esera. *There's a galaxy engulfed in war out there and they're playing in the water. They're not even in proper wetsuits! The air is warm but that water could give them hypothermia if they stayed in it too long…*

She huddled in the shade of a wooden canopy, hoping to escape notice, and keeping an eye on everyone else out enjoying the late summer sun. How did she, Jedi knight, a Raxian noblewoman, a Separatist intelligence officer, end up in a place like this? Esera counted everyone out on the beach, and determined she'd probably killed twice their number, directly or indirectly, not counting the mine. Did they know what was lurking among them?

The ball game finished, and broke up. "You should have joined us! It was fun!" Sanya called, as she jogged up through the sand towards her.

"No, I think not," said Esera. She threw Sanya a towel. "I don't want people ogling me."

"No one's going to do that!"

"I am not going out there more than half-naked."

"Everyone else is… What's the big deal?"

"When you said *resort*, I thought there'd be some privacy! This isn't private at all!"

"Oh. I thought going to the spa and having your scalp cleansed might have been too girly or something. I figured physical activity was more your style…"

Esera groaned. "Not with… all of me on display like this!"

"Not *all*," said Sanya, with a smirk. "There's actually a nudist-"

"*No!*" Not for the first time, Esera thought about giving up this fiasco. She could go help Alize and Shau Meo get the damaged kitchenware fixed, or snoop on whatever Sellero had gotten up to in Raxulon, or even fly off to Metalorn and wait around until Murshida regained consciousness. *Sanya wants to fix things between us, I should at least let her try,* thought Esera. *Even if it means putting up with… this.* Sanya was trying, she really was, but maybe Voyan was right. Maybe her Devaronian brain operated on principles that were just different enough to cause friction like this.

"Alright, the beach is a no-go. What do *you* want to do?"

"Well, instead of being… eye-candy to these people, let's go…" Esera looked down the beach, and pointed. "Climb that mountain."

"Sure. The tour guide said there are trails. How bad could it be?"

The Republic's highest-level military officials had gathered in a briefing room at the Military Center on Coruscant. Tarkin saw Director Orlok, all the oversector moffs–including his somewhat estranged younger brother who was hard at work commanding the Seswenna Oversector in his absence–, and a number of influential admirals. His Vice Chancellor, Sate Pestage, was there as well. Generals Ardabur Aspar and Gion Caraf, the original Knights of the Republic, represented their own branch of the military. The Jedi and civilians were pointedly not invited.

Tarkin stood. "Members of the military, Knights of the Republic, Vice Chancellor Pestage, thank you for coming on such short notice. As some of you," he nodded to Orlok, "have noticed, our production expenditures are not matching with what the Navy is actually receiving. This is not Kuati corruption or Separatist mischief. This is a deliberate misdirection undertaken on my orders."

His audience nodded along, but said nothing, so he went on: "Massive amounts of credits and materials are being diverted to a new device, one the enemy is believed to be working on as well, under the code name of *Ultimate Weapon*." Tarkin activated the holoprojector, and the diagram of the moonlet-sized spherical battlestation appeared. Now the crowd muttered.

"The schematics captured during the Battle of Geonosis, over four years ago, indicate this battlestation is to be armed with a superlaser capable of destroying a planet in a single shot." Muttering turned to gasps, and disbelieving stares. "Under the oversight of Orson Krennic, our own Project Stardust has sought to match the enemy's theorized developments. It has produced no workable results."

"*My lord,*" Moff Ardus Kaine, commander of the 18th Fleet at Eriadu said via hologram, "*are you telling us that the rebels have a superweapon we can't counter?*"

"I am not, governor," said Tarkin. "General Aspar and I have discovered an alternate weapon. Aspar, show them."

Ardabur Aspar stepped forward, and placed the black box he held on the table. He opened it, revealing the Seed they'd taken from the dead planet.

"What… is this?" asked Director Orlok, giving the rod a skeptical look.

"This is a weapon of the Infinite Empire," said Aspar.

The room exploded into scoffing and derision.

"*The Infinite Empire is a myth!*" said Admiral Praji.

"*Rakatans are just a legend created by the ancients to explain things they didn't understand,*" Moff Wessex told the man next to him.

"Then where did the hyperdrive come from?" Admiral Salima asked.

"*It's clearly a Human invention,*" said Moff Tanniel, who commanded the 10th Fleet from Taris.

"Enough!" Tarkin raised a hand, and the room fell silent, but for the hum of hologram projectors. He looked over all of them. "The Rakatans and Infinite Empire are not a myth, nor are they Jedi lies to keep the Galaxy complacent. They are real. We met one."

Let them consider that, Tarkin thought, keeping a smirk off his face as the admirals and moffs shifted uncomfortably. Ardabur Aspar took the silence as leave to speak:

"Unfortunately, he died within moments of us opening his stasis pod. But not before… telling us, about this." He took the Seed in his hands, and lifted it up. "It's taken days of translation and decoding to determine what this even might be. They called it 'the Seed.'"

"*To what? A flower?*" asked Moff Kaine, with a snort.

Aspar did not look at him, his mask hiding any reaction he might have had. "Many of you have expressed doubt in the abilities of the Jedi. But just as you doubted the Rakatans, you are wrong. Our powers are real." He levitated the Seed above his palm. "This is no magic trick, no conjuring or illusions. The Force is all around us, even if you can't feel it. It is the energy that ties the universe together. And it is the energy that will power this Seed."

"How so?" asked Orlok.

"The Force flows from living beings, from sentients like us to the lowest bacteria. There is energy in all living things, Director." Aspar tilted his head, and perhaps smiled beneath that mask. "And the fuel for this weapon is life."

No one even so much as murmured. They either didn't believe a word the Knight was saying, or believed it entirely and didn't like it.

"Think about it!" Aspar went on. "Take a few million criminals, traitors, deviants, people the Galaxy is better off without. Feed them to the Seed. Bring an end to this destructive conflict."

"…*A few million?*" Praji echoed, the lone voice in the stunned silence.

"Preliminary analysis indicates the Seed will require several million sentients' worth of life-energy to activate," said Aspar. "Rakatans measured the Force in a way we don't entirely understand. The numbers are not yet clear."

"And what happens when this thing is activated?" asked Orlok. He stroked his mustache, eyes squinting at the black rod hovering above Aspar's hand. "Once we've… *fed* millions of undesirables to this alien artifact?"

"We're not sure yet," said Aspar.

"*You want to activate an alien superweapon without knowing what it does?*" asked Moff Wessex. "*I respect your boldness, General Aspar, but I have some serious doubt about this.*"

"We're having to translate Rakatan into Old Sith into modern Basic, governor, these things take time," Aspar told him. "I am sure we'll discover its function soon enough."

"The superlaser will take twenty more years of research," Tarkin told the audience. "We don't have twenty years. This battlestation will be finished within eighteen months if given sufficient material and manpower. We can have a working weapon in that time, or we can have no working weapon. How much longer can we afford this war? I do not mean financially. What happens when an entire generation has come of age in defiance of the Republic? What happens when the rabble of the Galaxy see us unable to decisively defeat this rebellion? Geonosis should have been the end of the Separatists. We have been saddled with moronic Jedi leading our armies into an endless series of blunders and defeats, with useless civilian politicians getting in our way at every step, with a lumbering and inept bureaucracy that does nothing but perpetuate itself. I am going to sweep away these relics of the past. And anyone who gets in my way will face this weapon."

"A new order is rising," Aspar said, seizing the Seed in his fist. "Be sure to know where you stand when that day comes. As they said, loyalty earned at the point of a lightspear lasts only as long it is pointed that way."

Tarkin had never heard that saying before, nor did he know what a *lightspear* was. The meeting devolved into a discussion on the station's more mundane capabilities. By the end, they were all on board, even if most were obviously skeptical of the Jedi-derived mysticism and magic playing such a large role in the battlestation's capabilities. They would have to deal with it. After all, Tarkin considered himself no friend to the religious. If he could put up with this, then they all could.

Every breath in her lungs was fire. Sanya gasped and wheezed as she scrambled over the rocks. "Wait! Esera!" she called.

"Almost there," said Esera, from up ahead. "Come on, Sanya, you can do it."

"And I thought… Agamar was bad…" Sanya panted. Climbing a five hundred meter mountain along steep switchbacks was different from the long, straight slopes of the ridges she'd trekked over. And she'd spent two whole months in a jail cell, which might have had something to do with her breathlessness too. When she reached the summit, Sanya let herself collapse over a boulder.

"See? You did it," Esera said. She stood on a rock nearby, shading her eyes with a hand, looking out over…

A lot, really. The summit of the mountain was bald, allowing uninterrupted vision of the landscape they'd climbed above. A crescent-shaped beach arced out for many kilometers before them, butting up against a mountain far to the south, shadowy in the afternoon haze. The waves that had knocked her over this morning now looked like tiny white lines. The trees of the woodlands blurred into a green, yellow, and red mass, spilling over hills in the distance. The buildings of Tamwith Bay were just little colored blocks. The bay itself was a snaking pool of blue-brown, murkier and stiller behind its protective spit of land than the sparkling sapphire of the sea. A cool breeze flowed across her skin, bringing with it the scent of salt. The silence was broken only by the occasional bird call, the buzzing of some insect, and rustle of leaves in the wind.

"Wow," said Sanya.

"Yeah." Esera sat down on her rock, and took a swig from her water flask. She'd merely worked up a light sweat. And what was more, she was smiling. When was the last time Sanya had seen that? Not since she'd mentioned her master, back on Mandalore, and only then for a moment. Had that only been two weeks ago?

"Can you feel it, Sanya?" Esera asked her.

"Feel what?"

"Nothing. There's nothing to sense up here. It's calm, and quiet, and…" She shrugged. "It's what the Galaxy out there *isn't*. If I focus on the nothingness, completely clear my mind, become part of the nature around me… everything seems so far away. No troubles, no problems. Peace."

Sanya nodded, hoping she'd go on, and she did.

"Of course, that peace is an illusion. Nature is a battlefield, from the cellular level up to the trees. And that's a good thing, I think. The universe would be awfully boring if nothing ever changed. Life is change, and the Force is life. It works, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so," said Sanya.

"My master told me that once." Esera sighed, and her smile faded away.

Damnit, thought Sanya. "Losing him hit hard, didn't it?" she asked. Esera looked off at the horizon. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Esera took a few moments to answer. "I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Both. Things between us aren't going to smooth over in a few days of roaming Raxus. And you're not the person I trust with these things."

"Yeah, okay. Who is, then?"

"He's not here."

Hah! I know who that must be! Sanya cracked a smile. "That's right, Voyan went to Argai with Purity, and you're jealous about that. Your confidante stole your droid girl? Or did she steal him?"

Esera put her face in her hands. "There's no jealousy here! I just like keeping Purity close. I'm the only one who can stop her if some secret program Khan inserted makes her go murder-crazy or-" She stopped, and huffed. "Or maybe I just miss that creepy machine's antics."

"Why is Voyan the one you trust, anyway? Is it because he's a Human too?"

"That's part of it. He's got a better read on me than the rest of you do." Esera shrugged. "We don't always get along but he's got insight on things that… escape me."

"Because of the Jedi."

"Yeah."

In the Agricorps, youths who hadn't made the cut for padawan learner status were allowed much more freedom to explore what it meant to be young. If there was one good thing about this war, it was exposing just how brittle the higher Jedi Order had become. Sanya had been close to losing her mind on Agamar, but after what Zule had said about Shadday Potkin… there were definitely Jedi who *had* lost their minds out there. *And how close is Esera to becoming like that?* The question chilled her.

"We better start back soon," said Esera. "I didn't bring any lights, we don't want to get caught up here when the sun sets."

"Alright, fine." Sanya grunted as she pushed herself up. "I want a hot bath and a good drink after this, though. And you don't get to wiggle out of the second one."

Esera rolled her eyes. "I knew you'd want to go to one of those bars in town."

The Center for Military Operations had been where Maul was held, the highest security complex on Coruscant. He'd slipped out of it without a trace. And now the dark side energy had moved there. Asajj was convinced this was no coincidence.

"It's moving again," she said. "Back towards us."

"That didn't take long," said Kenobi.

"This may be the first look we ever get at Sidious. If they walk out the front door, which I think they are." The *pull* was getting stronger and stronger. If she closed her eyes and relaxed, Asajj wondered if she'd open the speeder door and take a step towards it… into thin air.

"Give me those," Kenobi said, tugging at the strap of the macrobinoculars.

"No!"

"I know more Republic government officials than you do. Could you name the Vice Chancellor if he's there?"

"…Fine." Asajj let the insufferable man take the device. *Insufferable, but not as bad as Ahsoka Tano,* she thought.

"That was surprisingly easy, you usually put up more of a fight. Shall I ask you out for a drink next?"

"This is *not* the time to be playing, Kenobi! They're almost here!"

Kenobi could wise up in a split-second. "I'm zeroed in on the front entrance. Here come the shock troopers… There's the Red Guard… Chancellor Tarkin, Vice Chancellor Pestage… oh, hello there, Gion Caraf. Ardabur Aspar too. And what is that you're carrying? Asajj, take a look."

He handed her back the macrobinoculars. The moment she set her eyes on the box in the masked man's hands, she *knew*.

"That's it! That's where the *pull* is coming from!"

"Are you sure?" asked Kenobi.

"Absolutely. It feels like it's going to pull my eyes straight through these lenses. Here, take these back."

"Ah, they're getting into the Chancellor's airspeeder. That thing is as tough as a tank, you know… and they're off, headed straight for 500 Republica, right where they came from." Kenobi put down the macrobinoculars, and started the speeder's engine. "I'll follow them, just to make sure."

"So, proof the Chancellor is in deep with the Sith. One of his top Knights, too. Who knows which of them is Sidious…" Asajj took a deep breath. "Kenobi, when did *your* side become the bad guys here?"

He stroked his beard, as he tailed the Chancellor's speeder from another traffic lane. "I need to talk to Shaak Ti," said Kenobi.

A few hours after the meeting, Tarkin received a call from Director Orlok. "*My lord,*" he said via hologram, in a strained voice, "*the rebels are hitting our spy rings.*"

"Which ones?" asked Tarkin.

"*Every one of our agents embedded in their logistics network is being taken out. I've told them all to go dark, but I'm afraid it's too late. This is either an unlikely coordinated spontaneous effort or they've known we were there for a long time.*"

"I don't like the sound of either of those, Director."

"*I don't either, Chancellor. But until our people start resurfacing, we're going to be all but blind to what the rebel fleet is doing outside major systems. Standard protocol is to wait at least two months before trying to get back in contact. Anyone who survives… well, we won't be hearing from them until-*"

"Until the next major operation is ready to begin, yes. This is most unfortunate, Director." Tarkin put his hand on his chin, and looked out over Coruscant. "Clearly Grievous doesn't want us knowing what he's up to. But I can imagine three targets he has in mind. Send out an alert to the regional commanders. A Separatist attack could come in the next two hours or next two months. They are to maintain battle-readiness until further notice."

"No, Esera!" cried a drunken Sanya, as Esera dragged her back to the hotel. "He was really, *really* cute!"

"He gave you his communicator number, you can call him when you're sober," said Esera. Manhandling–or womanhandling?–Sanya was effortless compared to grappling with Purity. Or dueling Grievous. She was so small and light. Which was why she could barely walk straight, at the moment.

"But-"

"No, Sanya. Just because he's a musician doesn't mean he's trustworthy. Probably the opposite, in my experience…" Months of drinking *real* Raxian wine had more than prepared Esera for the beverages found in the bars serving student vacationers in Tamwith Bay. She hardly felt anything, while Sanya was just another round from passing out. Those two men- *Men? No, those were boys,* Esera thought. Their greatest concerns in life were exams and girls. Those two *boys* had been doggedly persistent in trying to get to know them. For nefarious purposes, most likely.

"Hey, you two!" called a familiar voice.

Speak of the… "No thanks," Esera told him.

The stringy musician and his lumbering shockball jock friend jogged up the sidewalk after them. Rajan played in a band, Charno did the sports.

"No, no, we get it, your friend's gotta clear up, it's cool, don't worry," said Rajan. "We just want to make sure you can get her back okay."

"I'm doing fine," said Esera.

"Yeah, actually," said Charno, the big guy. "I'm impressed. I didn't take you for an athlete, I mean."

Esera rolled her eyes. *I'm never going to be annoyed at you again, Voyan,* she thought. Compared to these two, he was the image of class and elegance. "Look, I've got this. If Sanya wants to call you she will, it's not my business. I'm just not letting her wander off like this on her own. I wouldn't want strange men preying on me while I'm inebriated. I've had enough of that for one lifetime, thank you very much."

"I *want* to wander off!" Sanya said, feebly trying to shake free of Esera's grip.

"We just came out to see if you needed help, honest, we're not creeps," said Rajan. To Esera's immense annoyance, his feelings in the Force made it clear he *was* being honest. "And let's be fair, with Charno and I with you, you're a lot less likely to be picked on by any scumbags lurking around."

"I can handle myself," Esera told them.

"Sure," said Charno. "But can you handle yourself and keep your friend safe?"

The remark rankled her, not because she *couldn't* handle herself and Sanya at the same time, but because once again the Force told her that these two boys were acting out of genuine concern. Sure, their attraction to them was still there, but neither were creeps on the inside. It was a lot easier to dislike someone when their intentions were sordid.

Esera sighed. "Fine, you can come along."

"You've got a great friend, Sanya, she's really looking out for you," Rajan said to the Devaronian girl.

"Friend? Esera?" Sanya laughed. "Yeah, right! She hates my guts. Or did. Do you still hate me, Esera?"

"I never hated you, Sanya." But damn, did Sanya annoy her sometimes.

"See? Friends!" said Rajan.

"Hey, Esera, what's your workout routine?" asked Charno.

Can he get more stereotypically male? Esera wondered. "A lot of running and… fencing." *Lightsaber dueling* probably would have just earned laughter.

"Cool! Thinking about fighting the Jedi when they come?"

"Uh…" How was she supposed to answer that? *You oaf, I* am *a Jedi!*

"Me? I'm not afraid of those phony magicians. I can bench one-sixty kilos. I'll snap them in half, with my bare hands!" Charno laughed, and flexed. All Esera could do was roll her eyes once more. Were the Jedi seriously this misunderstood out here? And what did one hundred and sixty kilograms have to do with a bench of all things?

"That's great," she said.

"Where is that accent from, anyway?" Rajan asked her.

Not this again! When Sanya had waved these two idiots over at the bar, Esera had felt a panic she hadn't felt since Aspar ambushed her on Naboo. Explaining to these two kids that she was actually a Stalimurian naval officer was the last thing she wanted to do. That just invited too many other questions about who she was and how she got here.

"She's from St-" Sanya began, but Esera caught her.

"Semhanar," she said.

"Wine country, nice!" Charno smiled. "I've got family out there. Which town?"

Esera blinked, throwing all her focus into maintaining a straight face as she desperately tried to remember her Raxian geography. "Uh, Lakelon."

"You must be used to seeing the nobles around," Rajan said. "Is it true they don't pay the war tax?"

Now Esera really was clueless. Luckily, she had her master's teachings to fall back on. "That depends on how many bribes get paid," she said, recalling that corruption was an almost universal constant.

"Figures," said Rajan. "This war tax is getting ridiculous. Ten percent on all transactions! And for what? Some new starship we haven't even seen?"

"I've seen it," Sanya blurted. "It's *really* big!"

"You're drunk," Esera told her.

"I thought Zeltrons didn't get drunk," said Charno.

"I'm a *Devaronian!*" Sanya pushed up her bangs with her free hand, revealing two black, bony bumps. "I have these- these dumb little things instead of horns, but I'm Devaronian! *You don't have the horns to make it out there, stay on the home world like a good girl,* they told me! Hah! Look at me now! I'm on Raxus! I've fought fires the size of… really big fires! I told a Jedi master he was stupid! I met Grievous!"

"You did not," Esera said.

"No, I did! Remember, Esera? The day I got out of jail! You were meeting the fat happy old guy, the, uh, Grand Prince!"

"Man, Sanya, you party hard," Rajan said, grinning. Clearly, he thought this was a joke. "Grievous and the Grand Prince? You couldn't pay me to be in the same room as them!"

"She makes things up when she's drunk," Esera told them.

"No I don't…" mumbled Sanya.

"Everyone enjoys a good story," said Charno. He had his hands in his pockets, and was strolling along without a care in the world. And what was there to worry about here? Away from neon glow and throbbing music and noise of people, Esera felt a little more at ease. A cool wind came in off the ocean, and all was quiet but for the distant crashing of waves and police sirens somewhere far off.

Tamwith Bay took care not to pollute the sky with light: there were more stars than Esera had seen since… well, the last time Encounter's orbit took them into a planet's shadow. She hadn't really been looking then, not like now. A fond memory came back to her, from Murshida's planet, the first time the sun had set and the sea of stars above met the sea of lights waking up across the planet. That'd just been over half a year ago, but it felt like so much longer. The stars tonight weren't that beautiful, but they made her smile, despite the drunken Devaronian leaning against her.

"You spend a lot of time out there?" asked Charno, nodding up to the sky.

"What makes you think that?"

"I see spacers looking up like that sometimes. Like they're looking for home, out there."

"Yeah…" What was home, anyway? *Encounter*? Stalimur? Wherever she happened to be at the moment? The police sirens had moved closer, she noticed.

"We've never even been off the planet," Rajan said. "Maybe you could tell us about what's up there while Sanya gets her head back on straight."

"Ever been to Zeltros? I heard it's crazy!" Charno laughed, deep and loud. "My last girlfriend went there after we broke up. Didn't walk straight for a week, I heard!"

"I try to avoid crazy," said Esera, as her face burned crimson at the implication. These two kids were from a different world than her, and not just literally. If she had Voyan and Meo here instead, they'd be talking about much more civil subject matter. Or maybe it'd be something crazy too, just not as vulgar. *I don't belong in a place like this. I belong out there.* That was a comforting thought, actually. There were people out there she preferred being around. Perhaps that was a home enough for her.

By now, the police sirens were only a few streets over. *What is going on?* she wondered. Curiosity turned to alarm when she heard gunfire.

"Hey, are those- are those blasters?" Sanya asked, looking up, eyes going wide.

"I think so?" Rajan cupped a hand to his ear.

"They definitely are," said Esera. "You said this town had scumbags, Rajan. Just what kind of scumbags are we talking about? Black Sun? Pyke Syndicate? One of the Hutt cartels?"

"No! No way!" Rajan paled and shook his head. "I meant, like, guys who won't stop hitting on you and try to follow you back up to your room!"

"Then what is-" Esera was cut off by a commotion down an alley. Trashbins fell over, someone cursed, and the alley was bathed in red light as blaster shots rang out. Three figures stumbled out onto the street. Three ordinary Human men, dressed in ordinary clothes, but armed and radiating with hostile energy in the Force.

One of them leveled his blaster pistol at them. Charno and Rajan, who'd never had a gun pointed at them before, were frozen in shock. "Don't you move a muscle," said the gunman.

"Take the girls, shoot them if King Clanker's secret police try anything," the oldest of the trio said. "Big guy, skinny, hands against the wall and don't move a centimeter."

"Hostages, boss?" asked the third. "They're just going to slow us down."

"It's the only ticket we've got out of here. Our cover's not just blown, it's completely gone! So why not take hostages? If it gets us off this planet-" For a moment, the lead gunman took his eyes off Esera. And a moment was all she needed.

She didn't know who these people were, or what they'd done, but they were willing to put the lives of innocents like Sanya or these two fool boys in danger to get what they wanted. A Jedi did not stand idly by at times like this. Master Callo would never have.

Esera reached out in the Force at the same time she pivoted on one foot and kicked the other high up, crashing into the gunman's hand and sending his weapon flying. Even as she recovered, she sent him sprawling to the ground with a push through the Force.

"What the-!?"

The second gunman's cry turned into a choke as Esera slammed a hand into his throat, and knocked the wind out of his chest while she was at it. He crumpled.

Their leader was bringing about his blaster, barrel sweeping over the boys and Sanya. The Force tugged her to the left, and she followed; a red bolt flew past her ear and singed her hair. She was already closing the distance before he got another shot off. Esera rushed at him. Force or not, she'd lost the element of surprise. Against a man a head taller than her, she'd be at too much a disadvantage if she held back. So, she didn't.

Esera jumped, and planted a foot in his face. Her kick sent him falling backwards, his head slamming against the duracrete curb with a sickening *crack*.

The first man she'd taken down was scrambling to his feet, his blaster was in his hands. The second man's blaster flew into her own hand with a pull of Force energy. In a split second, Esera sensed his intentions and emotions, felt the lack of switch for stun on her blaster, and knew what she had to do to protect Sanya and the others.

She shot him through the chest, twice, and he tumbled over, life-force vanishing before he hit the pavement.

The whole encounter had lasted less than fifteen seconds. Esera let out her breath, and relaxed her stance. *Who were these guys, anyway?* she wondered. Ordinary-looking Human men. They could have even been Raxian. Her audience of three took a little longer to process what had happened, but when they did, they all spoke at once.

"Wow, Esera," Sanya said, in a tone more shocked than amazed.

"What are you?" asked Rajan, as he took a step back.

"You just… executed him," Charno said. He gaped at the corpses.

"No, I *killed* him, you can't execute an armed man," said Esera. "You'd better be glad I did, too, because he had no qualms about *executing* any of you."

The Tamwith Bay police stormed out of the alley, armed and armored, to find their work had already been done. *Typical,* Esera thought. But she recognized one among them. A Koorivar.

"You!" she said. "You're one of Aclinde's men! Mind telling me what the hell is going on here?"

"Good evening, Captain Komara," said the Koorivar. "I didn't expect to meet you again so soon. Didn't the General inform you about our counter-intelligence operation happening at the moment? There's something happening on every major planet right now."

"No, he did *not* inform me," Esera said. She put her hand over her eyes.

"I am grateful for your help, Captain, but unfortunately you've killed two of my targets. This one was the junior member of their ring." The Koorivar nudged the man on the ground with his boot. Wisely, the man was staying very still, but for his struggle to breathe.

"Well, they were going to kill these three if I didn't do anything. I suppose your boss wouldn't care about that, though, would he?"

The Koorivar shrugged. "I am not him, Captain, I cannot speak for him."

"Have fun with your spy, then. I'm going to go someplace quieter."

"Of course. I may pay you a visit later for your side of the story. Before I let you go, could you leave that piece of evidence behind, if you please?"

Esera looked down at the blaster pistol still in her left hand. "Oh. Right. Uh, here."

After passing on the weapon she gathered up Sanya, and set off for the hotel. The two boys had been snatched up by a police detective, who was taking their statement. Hopefully she wouldn't be seeing them again. Her world and theirs did not mix well.

"No hesitation, huh," said Sanya. The shock of the incident must have sobered her up.

"Would you rather be dead?" Esera asked.

"I guess not." Sanya looked away. "You can be pretty scary sometimes, Esera."

Esera sighed. "Yeah, I've heard. Come on, let's get cleaned up."

Aclinde had spent the better part of a week analyzing the results of the counter-intelligence operation. His report satisfied Grievous.

"*Those we didn't get were driven so deep into cover they won't be reporting in for months*," he told Grievous by hologram. "*You've got your window to start moving forces around discreetly*."

"Excellent," Grievous said. "Keep sniffing them out. Let it slip you haven't given up. I want those spies keeping their heads down."

"*It will be done, General*."

That was all from the Carammite, for now. Grievous switched his comms channel immediately. The image of a Givin hunched over a table appeared.

"Khwaramenes, report."

The skull-faced alien jumped. "*General! I've got a very basic path figured out, but I wouldn't trust it with my life. I need those two more weeks you said I'd have.*"

"How hard can these calculations be?"

"*Well, sir, I'll start by explaining what a topological manifold is, and how we can use it in hyperspace mathematics to*-"

"That was a rhetorical question, fool! Contact me the moment you have the fleet's course fully plotted."

"*Yes, General.*"

Slowly, Grievous's operation was coming together. He turned his attention back to the lynchpin of his plan: Sulwin City. It wasn't a terrestrial city, it was a space habitat. Governor Tarkin–Gideon Tarkin, not Wilhuff Tarkin, his elder brother–held command from within it, rather than a star destroyer. In Grievous's opinion, it was the correct choice. Sulwin City had the administrative apparatus to handle the smooth and efficient operation of an organization as large as the Republic's 18th Army and its associated oversector. Moff Gideon Tarkin commanded from the space habitat not for comfort, but to better manage his forces. Grievous could respect that.

He could also exploit that.

Yes, a very clear plan emerged in his mind now. *Surprise, fear, intimidation,* he thought, recalling Dooku's lightsaber lessons. As time went on, they became ever more applicable, in an ever wider range.

Only a few times had Obi-wan seen Asajj Ventress look genuinely unnerved, and now was one of those times. She stood before the Jedi High Council, having just finished giving them her report on the Chancellor and his associates… and the *thing* that *pulled* at her.

"This just reaffirms what we already know," said Mace Windu. "Something with a powerful dark side presence came to this planet and is now in the hands of a rogue Jedi. Ardabur Aspar may even be Sidious's new apprentice."

"How far can we trust the testimony of a former Separatist?" asked Agen Kolar.

"Her past does not inspire faith," Ki-Adi Mundi agreed.

"Hey, I'm still here!" Ventress said, crossing her arms and doing her best to look mad. She hoped she was hiding her fear from them well enough. "Take it or leave it, I know what I felt. The sooner you take out Tarkin and this Aspar freak, the better."

"Honesty I sense, in you," Yoda said, raising his head. The Grand Master looked so tired these days. What had happened to that jovial little green fellow she'd met all those years ago? "Too much of our affairs have you heard, young Ventress. Stay here for a time, you must."

"Hey, if it means taking down Sidious, I'm in," she said.

"I will keep track of Ventress personally," Kenobi said.

"Great," Ventress groaned.

"Would you prefer another minder?" asked Kit Fitso. What was he smirking about?

"No, Kenobi will do. Maybe I'll find a way to make him miserable."

"Please don't," Windu said. "This is a delicate time, Ventress. We all must be focused to our utmost."

Shaak Ti, spoke for the first time in the meeting: "The future of the Jedi Order is balanced on the edge of a knife. One slip and we are finished."

"A pessimistic outlook, my young friend," Ki-Adi Mundi said.

"But probably correct," muttered Ventress.

Days later, Obi-wan and she tracked down Shaak Ti. She wasn't in the Temple, or even on its grounds. Three kilometers away and thirty levels down into Coruscant's city, they found her in a private hangar, hard at work on a three-engined transport the size of a small building. *Where have I seen this ship before?* wondered Obi-wan.

"CSS-1, nice," said Ventress. *Oh,* Obi-wan realized. Chancellor Palpatine, newly sworn-in, had landed in one of these shortly after Naboo's liberation. Fourteen years ago... *How time flies.*

"Shaak Ti, where did you get this ship?" he asked.

"It is truly amazing, what you can acquire when you know who to ask," Shaak Ti told them. She was up on a scaffold, working on one of the starship's three engines. This thing had seen better days. The CSS-1 had been old, even when Obi-wan had been a padawan. The Republic had stopped using them before the Clone Wars even started. The hull was discolored in places, and some plates were obvious patches. But if the ship's Corellian engineering held true, she'd come together with some love and care…

"Do I even want to know?" asked Obi-wan.

"I saved a man's life, years ago. He was a man of power in the black market. And he took pride in paying his debts. I called mine in."

"Nice," said Ventress. "See, Kenobi? Even you Jedi can get your hands dirty sometimes."

He wasn't taking the bait, not this time. "You must be worried if you're preparing a ship in secret."

"Deeply worried," said Shaak Ti. "I hope to get the younglings off-world with this, at least. Should it come to that."

Obi-wan stroked his beard. "I don't want to think it will, but… It might. This dark side corruption goes to the very highest level of the Republic. Tarkin is compromised, there's no doubt about it. I fear the worst will come of this."

"And that's why I'm fixing up a ship," the Togruta Jedi said. "I'd rather have it and not need it. But planning for the worst is prudent, especially in times like these."

"Ain't that the truth," muttered Ventress. "Dooku always boasted you were on the verge of destruction. I thought it was just the raving of a power-hungry lunatic, later... but what if he was right? Just how deep is Sidious's influence? And openly displaying that dark side *thing*?"

"It's not a good sign he's confident to put that thing out in the open," said Obi-wan.

"Grievous on one side, Sidious on the other, and here I am, stuck with you sanctimonious Jedi." Ventress put her hands on her hips, and scowled. "How has it come to this?"

"The price of morality, my dear," Obi-wan told her. "Shaak Ti, who else knows about this?"

"You two, a few contacts in the underworld... possibly Master Yoda. He's more on our side than he lets on. But he's so tired, lately..."

"Let's keep it that way. And maybe pull some fire alarms over the next few weeks, so the Younglings have the evacuation routes fresh in their memories. If it comes to that."

"It will," said Ventress. "Things always get worse, in my experience."

Shaak Ti shook her head. "You bring the most delightful women around, Obi-wan."

Author's notes and responses: I said next chapter by the end of June, and here we are in the last third of August, almost. What happened? Well, the jobless era came to an end over a series of interviews that took forever to get scheduled, I started running a roleplaying game for some friends where I get to flex my creativity far more than fanfiction lets me, and simultaneously went on a deep dive into the art of storycrafting itself that ended with me having a personal crisis over the idea that the last fifteen years of self-taught writing had given me some very bad habits. This story is unsalvageable, I'd need to return to first principles to fix it, which I'm not. I knew my interest in Star Wars was on a time limit when I walked out of the theater, disgusted, after seeing The Last Jedi (the last Star Wars I ever saw in theaters too, lel). So I'm simply not going to fix this story and finish it as is before moving on to the greener pastures of original fiction. But as we discussed last time, character bloat has become an issue, and steps will be taken to remedy that. So, let's move on to review responses, we've had some critics during my absence:

One Valued Reviewer guest has brought up a lot of issues, some of which are ones I've addressed in prior author's notes he couldn't have possibly known of reading in chronological order (like Aspar being left injured on Murshida's planet) that I've agreed I did poorly. That one needs to be entirely redone (whether that happens or not is up in the air). Others I disagree with: for example, the clone commandos rolling a mostly non-combatant starship crew. See the battle of Vila Franca do Campo for what happened when professional infantry went up against ordinary ships' crews. Regarding Esera closing off again, see the above paragraph, I've recently realized I have some really bad writing habits I need to drop. This has been half a million words of training for me, I've made mistakes, some of them are big, I won't defend those. Aren't you relieved you didn't pay to read this? I sure am. I'm never writing a single word for a serious story without a full cover-to-cover outline ever again once I'm done with this fic.

There's a guest review on chapter 37, REEEEing at me because the ships are burning fuel to stay in orbit, and then asks how I graduated high school. I'm the author, I say keeping a million ton star destroyer in low orbit is fuel expensive because of the drag from particles in the exosphere (which you should have learned about in middle school). If the dinky little ISS needs constant altitude adjustments because of drag, so does a massive starship. More egregiously, he claimed Venators do not have a ventral hangar. Venators *do* have a ventral hangar. You can see it in the opening shots of Revenge of the Sith, when the SPHAT laser inside blows a Banking Clan frigate in half. It's literally in the movie, bro, don't tell me you missed that.

A Valued Ahsoka Stan, Viktor Janus, says my vitriolic author's notes actively detract from the enjoyment of the story. I can't help it, I'm a crotchety old internet boomer full of spite and malice, just like the actual baby boomers (see what I mean?). I apologize if I've caused offense. I'm glad you think I have real talent. It's actually just 15 years of constant practice, anyone could do it if they put in the time I have, and hopefully better because they won't be picking up aforementioned bad habits. Sadly for you, Esera's not going anywhere. One of the few good lessons I've learned is that the most interesting character should always be the main character. Not the morally best, not the always correct, but the most interesting, and for me, that's her. If you disagree, this may not be the story for you, because it's primarily her story I'm telling. That you don't want to see more of her may reflect badly on my writing skill, however… it's not my job as author to tell you how to interpret the story (and boy do I disagree with some of your interpretations!), but it is my job to keep you wanting more.

Ambaire, you claim to dislike my story so much but you kept coming back to read more, just to leave more mad comments. Why are you wasting your time like this? Please, find something healthier for your state of mind. Go ragepost about Disney executives or Dave Filoni, it always makes me feel better after.

Alright, that's all for now. For the non-critical reviews, thank you for comments, especially Valued Reviewer ErrorPleaseReload, who had read between the lines and come up with some very good analysis. To my beta reader Corshy1, thank you for finding the dumb errors that always slip by me. And to everyone, I'll see you next time, for a little mischief at Eriadu.

< Prev 53. Chapter 53: Last Days of Calm

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